

Implementation Tips for USAID Partners

Sharing Resources and Knowledge Among the Global CSO Community

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Definitions

Monitoring: Periodic tracking (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually) of your project's progress by systematically gathering and analyzing data and information about what you are doing, whom you are reaching, and whether your activities are being implemented as planned.

Evaluation: The comparison of actual project impact against agreed-on plans. Evaluation looks at what you set out to do, what you have accomplished, and how you accomplished it.

Adaptive Management: An intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context.

Source: USAID ADS 201

Goal: The long-term result your project is trying to achieve.

Context Monitoring: The systematic collection of information about conditions and external factors relevant to the implementation and performance of a strategy, project, and activities. This includes monitoring local conditions that may directly affect implementation and performance or external factors that may indirectly affect implementation and performance.

Source: USAID ADS 201

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Integrating Adaptive Management into Projects

Q What is adaptive management and how can it be integrated into projects?

A USAID defines adaptive management as “an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context.”¹ As the definition implies, adaptive management is not a “one and done” type of activity; rather, it is a continuous way of working that is reflective of and responsive to emergent knowledge. Adaptive management can be supported by formal checkpoints throughout project implementation and by informal, *ad hoc* opportunities to adjust implementation based on incoming evidence.

Some suggest adaptive management is a way of “making it up as you go along.” Instead, adaptive management is an intentional approach for reaching development goals when the pathways of change—the steps required (and their relationships to each other) for a desired change to occur—are uncertain. It involves calculated risk taking, questioning, testing of assumptions, and an openness to changing implementation approaches midstream so that goals can be reached more effectively. In this *Implementation Tip*, we discuss how adaptive management fits into a Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) approach (see *Implementation Tip* on [Integrating Learning into Projects](#)); when it is appropriate to use an adaptive management approach; the benefits of this approach; and how organizations and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) systems can support the use of adaptive management.

Adaptive Management as a CLA Activity

In response to the need for a more systematic and intentional approach to project learning, USAID developed the [CLA framework](#) and built it into the Program Cycle. CLA is a set of practices that help improve development effectiveness by encouraging stakeholders to reflect on and respond to evidence generated through MEL activities so strategies can be adjusted to improve outcomes.² (For a lengthier introduction to the framework, see *Implementation Tip* on

1 USAID, [ADS Chapter 201: Program Cycle Operational Policy](#)

2 USAID Learning Lab, [CLA Toolkit - Understanding CLA](#)

Definitions, continued

Indicator: A quantifiable measure of a characteristic or condition of people, institutions, systems, or processes that may change over time.

Source: USAID ADS 201

Network Analysis: An analytical approach that tracks and identifies relationships across various stakeholders within a system.

Source: USAID Learning Lab

Pause and Reflect: A component of learning and adaptive management; the act of taking time to think critically about ongoing activities and processes and to plan for the best way forward.

Source: USAID ADS 201

Scenario Planning: Identifying existing and emerging trends that may affect programming, determining plausible outcomes or scenarios, and taking steps to monitor and mitigate risks

Theory of Change: A description of the conditions and actions that will allow a project to achieve a long-term goal. A theory of change should include: 1) the context in which the development problem is situated; 2) the project's long-term goal and the intermediate outcomes (or preconditions) that need to be met to reach that goal; 3) the assumptions aligned with each step of the pathway of change; 4) the interventions that will be implemented to achieve the stated outcomes; and 5) indicators to monitor progress throughout implementation

Source: USAID How-To Note: *Developing a Logic Model*

Integrating Learning into Projects.)

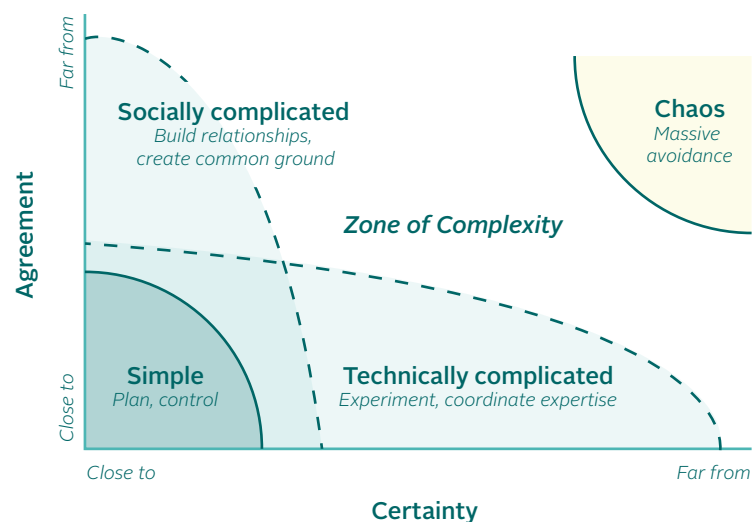
Adaptive management is the translation of learning into action for development activities. If learning is the act of collecting evidence, testing assumptions, and exploring opportunities for enhancing outcomes, then adaptation is the act of testing approaches and continually refining implementation based on that learning.

Development problems that call for adaptive management

When considering which projects might call for an adaptive management approach, consider the following questions:

Is the development problem being addressed simple or complex? As shown in the Agreement and Certainty Matrix (Figure 1), a simple problem is one for which the pathway to change is clear (high level of certainty) and there is widespread agreement on the long-term goal. A complex problem, on the other hand, is dependent on context, has an unpredictable pathway of change (low level of certainty), and lacks straightforward relationships among inputs, outputs, and expected outcomes. Importantly, an intervention that may initially seem simple can easily become complex when implemented in an unstable or fragile operating environment.³ Adaptive management approaches are well suited to address complex development problems. They enable greater flexibility and responsiveness to uncertain and evolving conditions.

Figure 1: Agreement and Certainty Matrix



Source: Patton, M.Q. (2011). *Development Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*. New York: The Guildford Press.

3 USAID Learning Lab, [Discussion Note: Complexity-Aware Monitoring](#)

Are there aspects of the project that are innovative or experimental?
When testing an intervention strategy that has not yet been applied in a given context or sector, adaptive management approaches can be useful for refining the intervention to improve its effectiveness and capability to meet long-term goals.

Benefits of managing adaptively

Intentional adaptive management grounded in learning allows implementers to be more responsive to shifting realities throughout a project and can make achieving longer-term outcomes and goals more likely. Adaptive management yields the following benefits:

- Proactive and timely use of MEL data—Because effective adaptive management relies on responsiveness to changes and testing of approaches, MEL data are more likely to be used for learning rather than purely for reporting purposes.
- “Failures” become opportunities for learning and adaptation—When well managed through early detection and responsive action, failed implementation approaches can inform development of new or adjusted interventions that yield more positive results and contribute to the longer-term goal.
- Experimentation and innovation—Rather than applying “cookie-cutter” approaches to solving development challenges, adaptive management allows for testing new approaches and adjusting interventions so they fit different contexts. A continuous improvement approach strengthens the effectiveness of development.

Using MEL for adaptive management

MEL systems for adaptive management (MEL4AM) are more complex than those for projects in which the pathways of change are clear. MEL4AM should enable project managers to look outside the “line of sight” of the project to observe changes in the surrounding context; unintended outcomes resulting from implementation; the various relationships among different levels of change and outcomes; differing perspectives of stakeholders affected by the project⁴; and the validity of the assumptions and pathways posed by the initial theory of change. These MEL4AM objectives require examination of how MEL methods and approaches are deployed, the frequency of MEL activities, and how evidence is used to inform adaptation. While traditional MEL systems use a “sense-analyze-respond” approach—in which data is collected, interpreted, then acted on—adaptive

⁴ USAID Learning Lab, [Attending to Interrelationships, Perspectives, and Boundaries: A Complexity-Aware Monitoring Principle](#)

MEL systems use a “probe-sense-respond” approach—in which implementers experiment and test interventions, gather information, and then refine an intervention for further testing.⁵

Adaptive MEL components

The following is a (non-exhaustive) list of potential components of an adaptive MEL system. Implementers should select those best aligned with the needs of the project and the organizational culture.



Theory of Change—Your project’s theory of change⁶ should articulate the project’s long-term goal, the intermediate outcomes (or preconditions) that must be met to reach that goal, and the assumptions aligned with each step of the pathway of change. An adaptive management approach suggests assumptions must be revisited throughout the life of the project, and the pathway of change may need to be adjusted so the long-term goal can be reached. When developing a theory of change using an adaptive management approach, a project team should:

- Clearly identify where there is uncertainty in the theory of change due to a dynamic (or unstable) operating environment or limited availability of information.
- Acknowledge that while higher level outcomes and the long-term goal may remain consistent, the lower-level outcomes should be illustrative in nature (or left undefined) to allow for adjustment.
- Build a monitoring approach that tests assumptions and the pathway of change.



Pause and Reflect Opportunities—These formal checkpoints serve as intentional times to think critically about ongoing activities and plan the best way forward.⁷ Project implementers may wish to use these times to discuss adaptations needed in light of:⁸

- Implementation challenges and successes
- Changes or shocks in the operating environment or context
- Shifts in stakeholder interests or priorities
- Emergent opportunities aligned with long-term goals
- Unintended outcomes of programming (both positive and negative)

5 USAID Learning Lab, [Discussion Note: Complexity-Aware Monitoring](#)

6 USAID Learning Lab, [How-To Note: Developing a Project Logic Model](#)

7 USAID, [ADS 201](#)

8 USAID Learning Lab, [Discussion Note: Adaptive Management](#)

Resources

- [USAID Adaptive Management Discussion Note](#)
- [USAID CLA Toolkit](#)
- [USAID CLA Maturity Spectrum](#)
- [USAID Complexity Aware Monitoring Discussion Note](#)
- [USAID Discussion Note: Systemic Thinking for Monitoring](#)
- [USAID How-To Note: Developing a Project Logic Model](#)
- [USAID Tips on Learning from Context: Formal and Informal Approaches to Understanding the Local Political Economy](#)
- [ODI's Scenario Testing and Visioning](#)
- [ODI's Making Adaptive Rigour Work](#)
- [DFID Political Economy Analysis How-to Note](#)
- [Bond's Adaptive Management – What is Means for CSOs](#)
- [Center for International Development at Harvard University's Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation Toolkit](#)



MEL Plans—Strong adaptive management practices often require accessing information outside regular indicator reporting activities. Project implementers can include learning questions in their MEL plans to fill information gaps so these questions are considered as part of the MEL processes. Examples of learning questions for adaptive management include: “What interventions (or set of interventions) are most effective with my target beneficiary group?” and “What are the unintended negative consequences of my intervention?” MEL plans should also articulate the mechanisms for making adaptive management decisions (e.g., regular pause and reflect activities).



Context Monitoring—Monitoring for changes in the operating environment acknowledges that programming is affected by the context in which an intervention takes place. Changes in the operating environment can trigger the need for a pause and reflect activity, which may result in a shift in implementation approaches. Decisions about what aspects of the operating environment to monitor should be linked to the types of changes that: 1) are most likely to occur; and 2) would have the greatest effect on programming efforts. Scenario-planning activities can also inform the type of contextual monitoring that needs to take place. (See *Implementation Tip on Integrating Learning into Projects*.)



Thinking and Working Politically—Sensitivity to the political context of an intervention requires constant awareness of who holds power, what their interests are, and how they can be involved in designing and implementing development solutions.⁹ This awareness, or approach, is aligned with adaptive management; it emphasizes “best fit” over “best practice” and promotes as-needed adjustments to programming based on rapid cycles of feedback and relationship building. (See *Implementation Tip on Political Economy Analysis*.)

9 DFID, [Political Economy Analysis How To Note](#)

For More Information

For this or other issues of *Implementation Tips*, please visit [NGOConnect.net](https://ngoconnect.net). The Web site is a dynamic and interactive portal dedicated to connecting and strengthening CSOs, networks, and CSO support organizations worldwide.

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Tracking and Documenting Adaptation—An important aspect of rigorous adaptive management is tracking significant changes made to a project and the evidence base for these changes. Documenting adaptation serves not only as a mechanism for accountability and transparency in communicating why changes occurred, but as a record of the intentional decision making and evidence base for each change.

Enabling environment for adaptive management

An organization's culture and processes heavily influence the ways in which a project is able to adapt. The list below includes several characteristics of a positive enabling environment for adaptive management:

- Staff feel they can challenge the *status quo* and propose alternative approaches.
- Staff are willing to admit that implementation approaches are not working and need to be changed.
- There is acceptance of uncertainty and risk in programming.
- Teams demonstrate strong communication and collaboration practices across functions.
- Leadership supports adaptive management approaches.
- Project managers are held accountable for achieving progress on higher-level outcomes and evidence of learning, rather than their ability to implement as planned.
- Staff time is made available for learning and reflection through regular workshops or reflection meetings.
- Field staff and project managers close to day-to-day implementation activities are empowered to make decisions on programming shifts.
- Hiring practices look beyond years of experience to consider candidates' curiosity and inquisitiveness.
- Processes (e.g., budgets, procurement, reporting, MEL) allow for flexibility in implementation approaches.

